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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the viewing behavior of a sample of public television supporters, specifically examining the relationship of their social characteristics to viewing and to knowledge about Africa as presented in the series "The Africans." Subjects, 120 District of Columbia adults drawn from the membership lists of a local public TV station, were interviewed by telephone six weeks after the first episode of "The Africans" was aired. A maximum of two follow-up calls were made after the initial call. Findings indicated some support for the belief that viewing "The Africans" contributed to viewers' knowledge about Africa, and that the viewing audience was active and interested in learning and apparently stimulated by the series to seek more information about Africa. Within this limited sample, learning and viewing were distributed somewhat broadly, suggesting that the series was not strongly perceived as a "black" program and had wider appeal. This supports the idea of the need for informational diversity in public television. Although this was a limited study, the role of viewing in predicting knowledge was strong and consistent with other research studies examining learning from well-structured television messages even under casual viewing conditions. (Tables of data and references are included.) (NKA)

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THROUGH THE PRISM OF RACE AND CONTROVERSY, DID VIEWERS LEARN ANYTHING FROM *THE AFRICANS*?

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Introduction

The study of race-related television content has largely focused on the negative characteristics of fictional images and their negative effects on viewers' perceptions of people of color. This is particularly true with respect to content about Africa and people of African descent. Because the African image on television has largely been represented by *Tarzan* movies and its progeny (MacDonald, 1983), the opportunity to observe the learning of accurate facts about Africa has rarely availed itself. The airing of *The Africans*, a nine part public broadcasting telecourse, provided such an opportunity in much the same way *Roots* did. The broadcast of both series raised important questions concerning the use of television to reeducate the public on sensitive racial history. The airing of *Roots* stimulated a number of research studies which investigated frequency of viewing, reasons for (not) viewing, stimulation of interpersonal interactions, and relationships of viewing frequency to social characteristics of respondents (Surlin, 1978). In this study, we were interested in describing the viewing behavior of a sample of public television supporters and examining the relationship of their social characteristics to viewing and to knowledge about Africa as presented in *The Africans*.

Learning from Television

Television is not the most effective medium for teaching specific facts to viewers. Both print and radio seem to add more to knowledge gained than television (Matabane, Gandy and Omachonu, 1986; Salmon and Leigh, 1984; Roberts and Bachen, 1982). Much of the research on knowledge transmission via television focuses on public and community affairs learned from news broadcasts. Though there are moderate relationships between knowledge and exposure even when education is controlled (Comstock et al., 1979), others argue that television's reliance upon visual headlines and quick paced emotional and dramatic shots

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constrains learning (Adoni et al., 1984). However, more successful results are reported when the information program is developed based upon a rigorous and conscious process of message design, program scheduling and stimulation of interpersonal networks as in health campaigns (Maccoby and Alexander, 1979, 1980). Commercial news broadcast and documentaries, however, are rarely developed in such a manner.

In the case of television documentaries, two studies were reviewed which suggested some television efficacy in knowledge transmission. High school students knew more about citizenship as a result of viewing a network produced film on citizenship than did nonviewers (Alper and Leidy, 1968). Fitzsimmons and Osburn (1969) report gains in public affairs knowledge among viewers of network television documentaries. Viewers were likely to report interest in related post-viewing activities as a result of their interest in and attitudes toward the topics. In the above studies, viewing was casual and not part of an instructional program with further informational inputs.

The instructional design of *The Africans* should enhance its effectiveness in presenting factual information even in the casual setting. Its use of learning objectives and repetition of content across all episodes substantially differentiates it from most commercial television productions. Further, as a public television offering, the series may have greater perceived credibility as accurate and unbiased which might be particularly important given the history of the stereotyping of content about Africa in the commercial media. This instructional design may make learning more accessible to all educational levels as well.

Most casual learning research has focused on commercial television viewing. They generally find that interest, conflict and controversy are important linkages to learning and exposure (Roberts and Backen, 1982). Viewers tend to prefer programs that support their beliefs or behavior (Atkins et al., 1979; Wilhoit and de Bock, 1976; Vidmar and Rokeach, 1974) which black viewers often express as preference for black-oriented programming (Frank and Greenberg, 1980; Allen, 1981; Bogart, 1972; et al.). Black viewers were more likely to view, react emotionally to and discuss *Roots* and *Roots II* than other viewing segments (Ball-Rokeach et al., 1981; Surlin, 1978). We expected blacks to be more interested in and view *The Africans* because of its racially oriented content in spite of its documentary format which Frank and Greenberg's study found blacks generally did not like.

Conflict appears to increase information salience and likelihood of interpersonal discussion as does perceived functionality of acquiring the information (Roberts and Bachen, 1982). Before *The Africans* was aired, it was characterized by political controversy with political conservatives and at least one government arts funding agency accusing the series' producers of anti-western bias. There was even an attempt to prevent the series from being broadcast.[1] Such pre-publicity controversy may have stimulated individuals to view who had not originally intended to and interest in the conflict may lead to more knowledge of Africa as presented in the telecourse.

Our interest in studying an audience for *The Africans* was to determine who viewed and why, and what were the most significant factors contributing to what viewers may have learned from the series. We were particularly interested in observing the importance of education to other factors such as viewing which may suggest enhanced possibilities for the teaching utility of telecourses. Generally we thought viewing, education, reasons for viewing, post viewing activity and race would be the best predictors of knowledge.

To understand the relative contribution of various factors to knowledge and viewing, we examined the followed research questions:

What were the main social characteristics of viewers, their reasons for viewing, for viewing more frequently, and participating in post viewing activities?

What were the overall structural relationships between knowledge of Africa, exposure to *The Africans*, reasons for viewing, post viewing activities, and viewers' social status?

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[1]The National Conservative Foundation launched an ad campaign in *Broadcasting Magazine* advising readers to "watch *The Africans*" then threaten financial support for public broadcasting. Such an a priori threat would have the effect of encouraging stations not to carry the program to avoid the post viewing lost of contributors.

Methods

A telephone survey was conducted to gather information from a purposive sample of 120 respondents in Washington, D.C. drawn from the membership lists of a local public television station. The survey was conducted six weeks after the first episode of *The African* s was aired between November 5-11, 1986. Interviews were conducted with the first available household resident aged 18 years or older. A maximum of two follow up calls were made after the intitial call. Respondents were described on the basis of race, age, sex, home ownership, education, subjective social class, average television viewing, frequency of church attendance, exposure to and frequency of viewing *The Africans*, reasons for viewing and knowledge of Africa. Nonparametric correlations (Spearman's) and hierarchical multiple regression were used to test the research questions.

The knowledge test used in this survey was developed from content presented in all nine episodes of the series. A pre-test of items was made among undergraduate students at a historically black university with the final 10 items selected on the basis of inter-item analysis. Test items focused on African technology, the political and economic benefits derived from exposure to western values, role of women in traditional society, religion, traditional democratic institutions and modern political affairs. Respondents used a five point Likert type scale to indicate degree of agreement with each statement. The responses were later recoded dichotomously as correct and incorrect (which included " not sure" answers). Scores were summed to obtain a single knowledge score (alpha=. 68).

The distribution of the sample's social characteristics was as follows for those responding: 42.5% were born before 1928 and 38% were born after 1946; about 59% were female and 78% were black. The social status of the sample was skewed upward. The median education level was some college and 67% were home owners. Nearly half of the respondents classified themselves as middle class and over 37% reported never attending church. Home owners tended to be older (r=.37), somewhat better-educated (r=.28) and female (r=.24).

Findings and Discussion

Much of the argument concerning learning from television centers on the content of social experiences that predispose individuals to consume specific content. These external factors, then, it is argued, are largely responsible for what viewers do and do not learn from viewing. Using this line of reasoning, we first examine the social characteristics of viewers, their reasons for viewing and participating in post viewing activities (all correlations mentioned are significant at $p<.05$ unless otherwise noted).

Because we used a purposive sample of public television supporters, we were able to obtain a sample where 41% of the respondents reported viewing at least one episode of *The Africans* compared to an overall market viewing rate of 6% in Washington, D.C. Another 19.3% reported viewing more than one episode. Among viewers, there was a fair amount of post viewing activity: 15% reported viewing the post show discussion at least once; 28% discussed the series with other persons or read more materials about Africa; 33% watched television newscasts about Africa; 27% viewed more television programs about Africa; and 14% reported listening to radio programs about Africa. Although 51% stated they had read about the series prior to its broadcast, only 13% were able to identify the series host by name or some other significant description. The sample viewed television generally an average of 3.4 hour per day.

Looking at Table 1, we find no strong social correlates to viewing or frequency of viewing. Only being black is significantly related but the correlation is weak ($r=.20$). For this sample, interest in the topic was the primary factor related to viewing. Those interested in learning new information ($r=.45$) and in Africa ($r=.36$) were the most likely to view. Next came interest in the controversy around the series or just a general interest in blacks ($r=.25$). Viewing was very weakly associated with vague reasons for viewing such as "the program just came on" or "no particular reason." Those who viewed and viewed more than once had conscious reasons for doing so. This is further illustrated by the significant correlation of these explicit reasons for viewing with the post viewing activities. These findings are suggestive of Frank and Greenberg's description of some viewing segments, including blacks, who are "an active audience seeking to use television as a means of personal growth and expanding horizons" (p.9). This viewing audience was not passive, seeking merely a means of passing the evening. Being black was the only social factor associated with more than one post viewing activity and

generally these correlations are moderately weak though significant. Blacks were more likely to pay attention to Africa in other media programs but not more likely to discuss it, read more or watch the post talk show. Older persons were slightly more likely to listen to radio programs about Africa. We conclude that generally we were unable to come up with a substantive profile of viewers in this sample beyond their own stated reasons of interest in the topic.

We further found that reasons for viewing were not characterized very strongly by social status. In Table 2, we observe that not even blacks were more interested in blacks or Africa. Older persons were somewhat more interested in blacks, and those with high social class (perceived) were just slightly more likely to state that they viewed because of interest in the controversy or for no particular reason. We were also surprised that not even education was related to reasons for viewing. We may only speculate that an informational documentary on Africa did not generate the same type of emotional and racial response as programs specifically about Afro-Americans.

Next we examined a hierarchical multiple regression analysis to determine the relative contribution of social status factors, reasons for viewing, viewing and frequency of viewing, and viewing the post talk show to knowledge of Africa. Through this analysis, we explained 39% of the variance in knowledge. In Table 3 we note that viewing explained 14% of the variance while reasons for viewing provided 13% of explained variance. However, a step by step examination of the regression equation strongly suggests that viewing was significantly more important in accounting for variance in knowledge than were reasons for viewing.

Upon their initial inclusion in the equation, home ownership and age contribute very little to our understanding of knowledge. Black and sex (males) both approach significance suggesting that black males were the demographic group who knew the most about Africa. These two factors contribute 6% to explained variance in knowledge. Education contributes 4 % to variance and being black increases to a significant level while sex still only approaches significant ($p<.06$). The inclusion of reasons for viewing into the analysis does not substantionally alter our profile of those who knew more. With reasons for viewing controlled, black males with more education are significantly more likely to score higher on the knowledge test. The most significant reasons for viewing are interest in Africa and in learning new information.

Viewing *The Africans* contributes 12% to explained variance. Amount of education and to a greater degree, being black are no longer significant in explaining who knew more. However, being male is still important with the second largest beta in the equation at this stage ($p<.06$). Though reasons for viewing explained 13% of variance in knowledge, once viewing is controlled for, reasons for viewing become nonsignificant and unimportant as factors in the equation. Frequency of viewing explained 3% of variance in knowledge and viewing the post talk show provided only 1% of explained variance. When frequency of viewing enters the equation, age approaches significance ($p<.10$) and its beta is nearly equal to that of sex. In the final equation knowledge is most closely associated with viewing the series. We found that older black males with more education who viewed *The Africans* and the post talk show knew more about Africa.

The cross-sectional design of the study does not permit us to conclude that viewing led to learning, however, the data strongly suggest that viewing did contribute to what respondents knew about Africa. Our confidence in this is strengthened by the fact that the best correlate of knowledge - education was not the best predictor. After controlling for a number of significant social factors which one would theoretically expect to predict knowledge, we still observed that viewing was the best predictor of respondents' knowledge. We were not surprised that black males knew more since we had expected race to lead to greater interest and there is much research documenting males' knowledge of political to be superior to females'. We were interested that older persons knew more since for the past 20 years beginning with the days of Black Power, interest in Africa has been associated with the youth. However, these older persons in our sample may have been the youth of the 1960's who have matured and retained their earlier interests in Africa, while today's youth lack that political experience and do not have the interest or knowledge.

In conclusion, we feel that this study provided some support for the belief that viewing *The Africans* contributed to viewers' knowledge of Africa. The viewing audience was active and interested in learning and were apparently stimulated by the series to engage in additional information seeking activities. Within this limited sample, learning and viewing were distributed somewhat broadly suggesting that the series was not strongly perceived as a 'black' program and had wider appeal. This supports the idea of the need for informational diversity in public television. Perhaps there are no 'ghetto' programs when substantial information that viewers wish to learn is involved. Of course, the findings from this study are limited both by its

design and sample, but the role of viewing in predicting knowledge was strong and consistent with other research studies looking at learning from well structured television messages even under the condition of casual viewing.

Predictor Variables	Criterion variable - Knowledge of Africa	
	Beta	R-square change
1.Social Status		
Home owner	.08	.00%
Black	.11	.03%
Female	-.12	.03%
Age	.14	.00%
2. Education	.12	.04%*
3. Reasons for Viewing		
Interested in		
Africa	.03	.07%*
Learning	.05	.04%*
Blacks	.01	.01%
Controversy	.05	.01%
4. Viewing		
Viewed *The Africans*	.26	.12%*
No. Episodes Viewed	.26	.03%*
Viewed Post Talk Show	.15	.01%

R-Squared =39%
F=5.21*

* - $p < .05$

Table 3

Hierarchical Multiple Regression

Structural Relationships between Knowledge of Africa, Viewing, Reasons for Viewing and Social Status Indicators

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	Viewed The Africans	No. Episodes Viewed	Watched Post Show	Discussed With Others	Read More	Viewed More TV	Viewed More TV News	Listened Radio Program	Avg. No. Hours TV Viewing
1. Interests in									
a. Africa	36*	44*	47*	35*	12	34*	29*	21*	16
b. Blacks	25*	30*	38*	27*	29*	26*	29*	28*	08
c. Learning	45*	44*	34*	35*	20*	37*	34*	27*	19
d. Controversy	25*	25*	-08	04	26*	14	23*	04	06
2. Program just came on	11	09	-04	16	-05	16	14	-04	-01
3. Viewed for no particular reason	22*	24*	-08	08	15	-12	-06	-08	-11
4. Social Status									
a. Black	20*	16	11	18	08	26*	24*	20	20*
b. Female	-03	-06	-09	-07	-08	-00	-13	-14	09
c. Age	07	16	01	12	13	16	15	18*	03
d. Homeowner	08	13	04	12	16	09	07	02	04

TABLE 1

Relationships between Viewing, Reasons for Viewing and Social Status Indicators (Spearman's Correlations, decimals dropped) * - p<.05

	Viewed the Africans	No. Episodes Viewed	Watched Post Show	Discussed With Others	Read More	Viewed More TV	Viewed More TV News	Listened Radio Prog.	Avg. No. Hrs. TV Viewing
e. Education	15	17	16	17	12	15	19	08	-13
f. Subj. Social Class	08	06	-08	-11	04	-02	-02	-14	-16
g. Freq. Church Attendance	12	01	-06	05	01	11	01	-01	-12

TABLE 1 Con't.

Relationships between Viewing, Reasons for Viewing and Social Status Indicators

(Spearman's Correlations, decimals dropped)

	Black	Female	Age	Homeowner	Education	Subjective Social Class	Frequency Church Attendance
1. Interest in							
a. Africa	03	-05	05	-05	07	-10	00
b. Blacks	07	09	23*	05	15	-03	03
c. Learning	07	06	05	-12	03	-04	08
d. Controversy	-02	-08	-14	05	17	20*	-11
2. Program just came on	-07	08	-10	06	-01	-09	10
3. Viewed for no particular reason	06	-03	12	03	-01	21*	00

TABLE 2

Relationship betweenReasons for Viewing and Social Status Indicators

(Spearman's Correlations, decimals dropped)

* - $p<.05$

ABSTRACT

THROUGH THE PRISM OF RACE AND CONTROVERSY, DID VIEWERS LEARN ANYTHING FROM THE AFRICANS?

Casual viewing of television is generally not highly associated with effective learning of specific facts. Social background factors leading to specific content viewing are thought to influence more what viewers learn. However, knowledge of Africa as presented in The Africans was best explained by the viewing of that public television series among a purposive sample of public television supporters. Using a hierarchical multiple regression analysis, 39% of the variance in knowledge of Africa was explained primarily by viewing the series, viewing a related post talk show, age, sex, education and race. These results support the belief that viewing The Africans contributed to what respondents knew about Africa and that learning from a well structured television message may also be effective even under casual viewing conditions. In this sample, viewers were from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds and were actively interested in learning further suggesting the possibility of presenting what was generally though as race-specific content to a broader audience as diversity.

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